National Unity — Is This the Latest Form of Fascism?

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I AM to speak to you this morning about a remarkable movement now sweeping this country under the name of "national unity." Within twenty-four hours after the election of Mr. Roosevelt this movement was started, under the leadership of some of our most distinguished and respected citizens. The idea behind the movement is perfectly clear, and may be stated without any danger of misunderstanding. We have just had a hard-fought and bitter election. We have chosen our President, and therefore determined our administration for the next four years. Let us now close up our ranks, forget our differences, and give the President the support of a united people. Such support is important at any time, in the interests of good sportsmanship if nothing more. It is not only important but necessary at a time like this, when the nation is standing in peril of its very destiny and life. America is a democracy, and democracy is battling this day against the most dangerous and desperate enemies which have ever assailed the liberties of men. There can be no division in such a crisis—no partisan dissension, no divided counsel. Our situation is like that of a beleaguered city, with the enemy, not standing at the gates to be sure, but marching down the highways, with victory after victory to herald their advance. In such a city the people would have to stand together, in single loyalty to their commander. Opposition to his authority, or even policies, would be regarded

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as tantamount to treason. As with the city, so also with our country in this predicament! The years ahead are critical, and we shall not survive them unless we work for and achieve a national unity in the spirit of "united we stand and divided we fall."

Now, to this idea of unity in itself I have not the slightest objection. On the contrary, I have been preaching unity all my life from the standpoint of the religious concept of that "unity of the spirit which is the bond of peace." Yet I am frank to say that I am afraid of this idea of unity as applied to the politics of our country in this vast emergency of national and international affairs. I do not question for a single moment the sincerity and devotion of the men who have put themselves at the head of this movement with the laudable intention of bringing the citizens of the nation more closely together in the service of all that we hold dear in our culture and civilization. But I wonder if these men have considered the implications of their movement? Have they thought their undertaking through to its farthermost consequences in the life of the republic and of the individual citizens of the republic? Do they really agree that unity is the one most important thing to be emphasized in this crisis of our national life? Have they never considered the possibility that liberty is perhaps a more vital essential at this moment? The two ideals, to be sure, should go together. Daniel Webster linked them immortally in his great oration in reply to Hayne in 1830, when he cried, "Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable." But if we emphasize the one to the neglect of the other, is there not danger that this other will be forgotten? And could there be anything more tragic at this hour than that liberty should be forgotten for however good a cause as unity?

I can best express what I have in mind by reminding you that, in all the totalitarian countries today—in Italy, in Ger-

many, in Russia—it is national unity which has been used as the keystone of their political arch. Without this keystone it is difficult to conceive of these totalitarian states holding together, or ever being started in the beginning. Thus, there is one leader in these countries to whom implicit obedience must be given. It is impossible to imagine any opposition leader appearing to dispute the leadership of the *Duce* or the *Fuehrer*. There is one party—the Fascist party, the Nazi party, the Communist party. It is inconceivable that any opposition party could be permitted in any of these countries to nominate candidates and contest elections. There is one policy, or program—the will of the government which is the law of the state. Under no circumstances, in either Italy, Germany, or Russia, could any other policy for the nation be advocated or even suggested. Here is the very quintessence of national unity—the welding of a whole people into a mass as solid as a bar of steel. It is no accident that the word "totalitarian" has been coined to describe the nature of these countries. That any true American should desire anything of this sort in this country is of course impossible. In raising the question as to this movement for national unity, I am not suggesting that this is the intention of any one of my fellow-citizens—least of all of these admirable gentlemen who are espousing at this moment the cause of unity. I am simply afraid of the tendencies that are involved. I seem to foresee the steps that may be unwittingly taken down into the pit of darkness from which all of us would pray to be delivered. What we want to do is to protect and save our democracy—and instinctively I shrink from a movement, or an idea, which has been used in other countries to destroy everything that I would here preserve. "Easy is the the descent into Avernus," wrote the poet, Virgil, in the peculiar circumstances of his day. Easy also is the descent into our Avernus, if we watch not every step that we may take.

May I clarify my fear of this movement for national unity by specifying the steps that may so easily be taken under its influence?

(1) The point around which we are all asked to rally at the present moment in unbreakable unity is that of national defense. This is the very point, by the way, around which Adolf Hitler rallied the German people after he had taken power in 1933, and was faced by the task of consolidating the nation beneath his rule. The argument is that we are in danger. We have poor defenses against this danger. Therefore we must all unite in providing these defenses. To stand in opposition would be to weaken defense itself, and thereby expose the country to the enemy. So we are all challenged, Democrats, Republicans, and Socialists alike, to support this great program of armed preparedness—an army vastly enlarged over anything we have ever known in time of peace, a two-ocean navy which will be the strongest in the world, and not less than 50,000 aeroplanes to command the air above our soil. National unity, in its initial stages, means support by all our citizens of this program of armed power on land and sea and in the air.

But there are some of us who are opposed to this program, not as a matter of factional politics, but as a matter of philosophical principle and religious ideal. We believe that preparedness of this type is no defense at all. On the contrary, it is our unshakable conviction that such preparedness invariably leads a nation not to peace and security but to war and insecurity. We know of no one cause that has led more directly and inevitably to the wars that have been wrecking Europe in this century than this very competition in armaments in which we are now being asked to join. Preparedness, we insist, always leads to what you prepare for—namely, war. If we who think this way denied what is to us a fact, attested by

every page of history that has been written since the beginning of time, or were silent in the face of the repudiation of this fact by our own government, we would be betraying our country to that very fate which the country itself is most eager to avoid. Therefore, we must speak out; we must present our case and argue our opinion; we must, in the last analysis, oppose this program of preparedness, else be faithless to our duty to the nation as we see it. Yet we are being told, in the interest of this movement for national unity, that we must join our fellow-citizens in arming America to the teeth. There must be no majority nor minority sentiment upon this question, but only one united will.

At the heart of this preparedness program, by the way, is the system of peace-time military conscription. On the day when the conscripts were being registered, October 16th last, a little group of pacifists gathered in one of the great churches of this city, and pledged themselves together against the law. When this meeting of pacifists was over, a parade was formed to march the streets. Each parader carried a placard on which was printed an inscription deploring the conscription law as a violation of the democratic principle, and urging its repeal. Were these pacifists wrong in thus breaking the unity of the national spirit on this momentous day of registration? Were they not rather vindicating that very ideal of democracy which the conscription act itself was intended to defend? Where in all this country was there a more convincing demonstration of the fact that we have something here in America—a fundamental freedom of thought and action—which may well challenge our "last full measure of devotion"? If the movement for national unity means to oppose, or even discourage, such expression of dissent as this, then there is a reason for the suspicion that, consciously or unconsciously, its tendency is already in the direction of the very fascism which it abhors.

(2) The next step of national unity, beyond the rallying for national defense, will be the demand for undivided support of the President in all his policies. The call for such support has already been lifted. We are reminded that Mr. Roosevelt is *our* President. An overwhelming majority of the electorate has chosen him for a third term, and thus made him the leader of us all. It is a matter of duty to uphold his hands. Especially in this crisis of human affairs, when our enemies are looking for every opportunity to break us down, must there be no separation in our allegiance to the man who speaks and acts for the entire nation. To him we must give the undivided loyalty of hand and heart.

I suppose there is no one of us who does not instinctively feel a glad response to this appeal. Every heart kindles to the spark of leadership. To follow a chosen chieftain, or commander, on some high adventure of the spirit is one of the most exhilarating and therefore satisfying experiences of human life. We all want to support our President, and see him succeed, and help him succeed. But presidents are not infallible. They make mistakes like other men. It is the very merit of democracy, is it not, that it recognizes this fact, and thus provides for a variety of counsel. Each man may have his own idea as to whether the President on any occasion is right or wrong, and the President must prove his case before the judgment bar of public opinion. But national unity ignores or defies this fact. It urges that we support the President altogether apart from the dictates of our private judgment. It asks, or seems to ask, that we abdicate to the President, a single man, that prerogative of authority which a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, properly gives only to the whole body of the citizens.

Suppose, for example, that the President in his wisdom should decide, a few months hence, that this country should be

taken into the European war. The President might be right in this decision—right, I mean, from the standpoint of his own best judgment and intent, which is the only way that any man can be right on any question. But there are millions of persons in America who would disagree with the President. We know, from the present temper of the people, that it would be impossible to take this country into the struggle across the seas without tremendous opposition. The citizens whose property would be seized or taxed out of existence, the workers whose hard-won privileges would be curtailed if not altogether destroyed by the war power of the government, the parents whose sons would be snatched away to fight and die, the religionists and idealists who are conscientiously opposed to war, the humble folk who want peace for any reason selfish or unselfish —all these would want to rise up in one great body of protest and alarm against an act of war. But if national unity means what it says it means, these people would not rise up at all. They would not oppose the President, though they are the ones who must pay the price of his decision, but support him regardless of their personal interest and opinion. The very urgency of the crisis, and momentousness of the presidential act, would make in this case a special demand that the hands of the chief executive be upheld. Which raises the pertinent question as to where national unity is taking us! For where lies the difference, so far as practical consequences are concerned, between a German Reich which demands the unanimous support of a Fuehrer because he knows what is best for the nation, and an American republic which demands unanimous support of a President because he must lead, in the hour of danger, a united people? In both cases you have a subjection of the citizenry of a country to the will of a single man—which looks far more like fascism than it does like democracy.

(3) The next step in this movement for national unity

would seem to be inevitable. Obviously, if a whole people must be bound to the support of a president, then there must follow, as the night the day, the abrogation of the party system of government. In the interest of unity, we must dissolve the contending political parties, and become one party in the service of one cause of national security and honor. This idea was first broached, if I remember rightly, in the days just preceding the opening of the late presidential campaign. France had suddenly collapsed before the onslaught of Germany. England seemed to be trembling on the brink of some kind of terrible and final disaster. A great wave of excitement and alarm swept over this country like a whirlwind. This is no time for a presidential campaign, said many an apostle of national unity. In this hour of deadly peril the nation must stand together as a single man. To this end, said no less a person than Miss Dorothy Thompson, we should give up our party conventions. Instead of nominating rival tickets, let the Republicans and the Democrats agree upon a single ticket—Mr. Roosevelt for President and Mr. Willkie for Vice-President—and thus lead a united people to a national victory far greater than any party victory. Now that the campaign is over, this same abandonment of party government is suggested again. On the one hand, Mr. Willkie is urged to place his influence and example at the disposal of the administration; and, on the other hand, Mr. Roosevelt is advised to find a position for Mr. Willkie in his cabinet. Let party rivalry be suspended, and the nation stand united before the world!

One may wonder, as one considers this idea of national unity at the expense of party government, why it has never been found necessary before, even in the most critical periods of the nation's life. In the early days, when a weak republic of not more than four million inhabitants was confronted by the aftermath of the French Revolution and the wars of Napoleon, the

Federalist and Republican parties contended furiously for the control of the state, and ended with what came near to being a movement for secession among the Federalists. In the terrific crisis of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had to deal throughout the entire four years of the struggle with a militant opposition; and in the campaign in 1864 he resigned himself to what he felt was going to be his inevitable defeat at the hands of General McClellan and the Democrats. In 1916, when the European war had been raging for two dreadful years, and the problem of America's relation to the war was as acute as it is today, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Hughes fought a tremendous presidential fight, which ended in one of the closest elections in the country's history. Yet now we are told that we must abandon our rival parties, and unite in a single goverment in Washington! Can it be possible that we are being tempted of totalitarianism, which has no feature quite so distinctive as its elimination of all political parties except the one controlled by the dictator in his own especial interest? In Russia, the Communist Party; in Italy, the Fascist Party; in Germany, the Nazi Party! Is this the model we are to follow! And, if so, how can we pretend to be safeguarding the interest of a democracy which it is our highest purpose to preserve?

These are the steps which we are taking, or being asked to take, under the influence of this idea of national unity. How naturally these steps follow one another! First, we must all stand by the defense program which has been launched by the administration. Next, we must all support the President as our leader, regardless of our own personal or party judgment as to whether he is right or wrong. Thirdly, we must give up our separate political organizations, or at least suspend their operations, and "for the duration" of the emergency become one party as we are one people. In the fact of this procession, one may well ask, What are the next steps toward

this goal of national unity? How far are we going to proceed in the direction of what would seem to be familiar aspects of certain contemporary European standards of political and social life? And how can these standards be reconciled with anything that you and I have been taught to recognize as American democracy? Which brings me to the crucial question of this hour! What, after all, is democracy?

The first answer which is usually given to this question is that democracy is the rule of the majority, based on public education and the elective franchise. A question is raised in our national life, a policy recommended; then there follows a period of debate in the newspapers and forums of the country. In due course, a law is passed, or an election held; and by a majority, large or small, the will of the people is revealed on the issue under discussion. This is a decision which, by the due process of majority rule, becomes the decision of us all. The nation has now spoken, and we are all part of the nation; so we must all obey what we ourselves have done. This we usually do. It is amazing, when you come to think of it, how successfully by this method of majority rule we come to an accord even on the occasion of the hottest differences of opinion. Indeed, I can think of only twice in all our history when the will of the people, as registered by a majority vote, has been openly defied. Once was on the slavery issue when the South rebelled against the election of Abraham Lincoln; and once was on the liquor issue when people everywhere rebelled against the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. But these are remarkable exceptions to a rule which has made majority control seem to be the very essence of democracy.

Yet we cannot stop at this point! We have hardly begun as yet, to my mind, to penetrate to the core of what we mean by the democratic principle. For what does a majority imply if not a minority? And what would happen to the majority

if the minority disappeared? Why, it would not remain a majority at all, but would become a totality. The whole body of the people would become merged into a single undivided, and in due course, I fear, indivisible mass, into which everything that we know as democracy would become absorbed, and forthwith vanish. The fundamental requisite of a democracy, therefore, is not a majority but a minority. This is the reason, I take it, why the Bill of Rights in our national Constitution, which was written for no other purpose than to protect American minorities from extinction, has been regarded through all these years as the very heart of our government. Freedom of speech! — this needs not to be guaranteed to a majority which through sheer force of numbers can take care of itself, but to a minority which can so easily be silenced by the contempt and intolerance of men. Freedom of assembly! —this is a matter of concern not to the majority which controls the police power of the state, but to the minority which must exist on sufferance if it does not exist by public right. Freedom of press! — this is a safeguard not for a government, as in Germany and Italy and Russia, which can swamp a nation in the flood-tide of an official propaganda, but for little groups of helpless and yet eager people who have something that they want to say to a heedless and frequently hostile world. It is easy enough in our day to see what happens when a system of government is identified with nothing more important or significant than the rule of the majority. In every one of the totalitarian states we see the disappearance of minorities before the onsweep of dictatorial rule. Contrast with this the spectacle of England, which, even in the midst of a war to the death, preserves inviolate the principle of the right of the minority not only to maintain its integrity but also to lift its voice. In the House of Commons, under the rain of bombs from German planes, there sits today, as there has sat for hundreds of years,

in storm and calm alike, that body of stalwart men who are known as "His Majesty's Opposition." And in the Commons, opposite the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, there sits the man, supported by a special salary from the Crown, who is known as the Leader or "His Majesty's Opposition." Here is the best illustration I know of the momentous fact that the existence of minorities is the touchstone of democracy. So long as minorities are recognized and protected, we know that democracy is alive. So long as they are even tolerated, we know that democracy is not dead. But when minorities are persecuted, or repressed, or destroyed, then we must know that democracy has gone and tyranny has come.

The philosophy of all this has been immortally set forth by John Stuart Mill in his great essay, *On Liberty,* which is one of the noblest interpretations of democracy in our literature. Denying "the right of the people to exercise coercion, either by themselves or by their government," he declares that the protection of minority opinion is the only safe and true basis of free society. "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion," says Mill, in a famous passage, "and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind . . . All silencing (of opinion)", he continues, "is an assumption of infallibility," and therefore a blow at the very heart of democracy. "The majority," says Mill, in another passage, "being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody," and thus are tempted to suppress the minority. But this is the one thing which democracy cannot survive. By the same token is it the first and also the decisive step toward autocracy—or totalitarianism, as we have been taught now to call it. In an

amazing passage, written so many years ago, John Stuart Mill presents a picture of what has now befallen so large a part of our modern world. It is of great importance, he writes, "not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, . . . the first in importance surely is man himself. Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery—by automatoms in human form—it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatoms even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilized parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."

This same point of view—of the protection of disagreement and dissent as the very essence of the democratic principle—has been expressed in vigorous fashion by our distinguished contemporary, the great American architect and philosopher, Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright. In a letter to the *Christian Century* of only a fortnight or so ago, Mr. Wright protests against the totalitarian tendencies that are now at work in our own country. He denounces the attempt, for whatsoever purpose of national unity, to turn the American people into an inchoate mass of conciliatory opinions and ideas—what Emerson called in his day, "a mush of concession." "The only safeguard democracy has," says Mr. Wright, "is a free, morally enlightened, fearless minority. Democracy deprived of either the vote or the voice of that minority will stay in infancy . . . Democracy's very life depends upon entire freedom to choose from among its free minorities the bravest and best thought. If party pacts are

equality and brotherhood—what is it but the very unity we are seeking, and a unity as different from this so-called national unity as democracy is different from totalitarianism?

The trouble with this current idea of national unity is that it concerns itself with matters which are non-essentials, and therefore in their very nature divisive; and which cannot be reduced to unity except under the influence of an external pressure which belongs not to democracy at all but to dictatorship. I refer, of course, to these very matters of opinions, policy and party which are now being specifically urged upon us by the advocates of unity. This program of national defense, for example! How can we ever agree as to what it shall be, or as to whether it shall be at all? This unanimous support of the President! How can this be regarded as either desirable or safe, when any president is fallible, and by the very terms of our government must be corrected and guided by the public will? This suspension of parties and elections! How can this be made consistent with a system of society which is founded upon the very idea of "opposition"? There can be no unity here. There should be no unity here. Men will differ, and should differ, upon such matters as long as they are free. But there is a higher and nobler unity which may make us one, and at the same time keep us free. I refer to that unity which has to do not with opinions but with principles, not wth ideas but with ideals, not with an outward policy but with an inward pattern, not with a structure of conformity but with a spirit of accord. This is the unity which is expressed in the familiar epigram, "We agree to disagree." We unite in vindication and protection of our right to differ. We are one in the common recognition that we are many. We stand together that we may establish upon the earth a society in which men may stand apart, and therewith achieve unity in liberty.

This is the true unity, as contrasted with that specious

national unity which is being commended to us at this hour. The glory of this unity, which is in essence spiritual, is that it deliberately cultivates diversity, whereas this national unity, essentially political, as deliberately manufactures uniformity. It is just this uniformity, enforced by tyranny, which is the curse of totalitarianism, and which can never be the blessing of democracy. Therefore, do I plead for this other and better unity which lives in liberty and flourishes in diversity. St. Paul had the idea when he wrote his first letter to his fellow-Chrstians in Corinth: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit. And there are diversities of administration, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God who worketh all in all. But to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal. For to one is given wisdom . . . and to another knowledge . . . and to another faith . . . and to another gifts of healing . . . and to another prophecy . . . and to another diverse kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues; but all these worketh the one and the same Spirit."

This is the unity I believe in and would cherish. The one body, with many members, "and all the members, being many, are one body"! It is the kind of unity, is it not, which we have tried to realize in this church. Our basic principle here is freedom. Every person comes within this place in his unimpaired integrity as an individual, with no expectation or obligation save that of being true to himself. Every member joins this church in fidelity to his own convictions, in contrast to those of the minister, or any other member. We have no creed to impose upon the mind, no discipline to lay upon the heart, no rule of salvation to dictate the terms of the religious life. Every man or woman in this gathering stands apart from every other in the sanctity of his own distinctive personality—free to think his own thoughts, to hold his own beliefs, to live his

own life—to be himself. Yet we are a church, a community, "one body." For our liberty is itself a unity. We come together because in freedom there is the highest fellowship, as in fellowship there is the safest freedom.

Now, this unity which I crave for my church, I crave also for my country—a unity of free men in dedication to their freedom. This is the only kind of unity which is worth having. To melt men down into one body of opinion, to drill them and dragoon them into obedience to one leader, to pour them into the ranks of one party—this, I grant you, is to secure a certain type of unity. It is a type, however, which is fatal to the very democracy we would preserve. But to liberate men as free beings, and then summon them to stand together in allegiance to liberty—this is to secure another and better type of unity, which is democracy itself.

I find myself thinking again, at this closing moment, of Thomas Mann, and his little book, *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. Comparing "one political system against another," fascism against democracy, Mann comments on how fascism "exhibits robust practical advantages over democracy." Thus, it can launch a single thunderbolt of war to annihilate its enemies! But democracy has other and more vital advantages, says Thomas Mann, if it be not "confined to (its) technical-political aspects." "It is insufficient," he says, "to define the democratic principle as the principle of majority rule." Democracy strikes deeper—into the very soul of man. It therefore has "timeless aspects," "unlimited powers of self-renewal," an "inexhaustible store of potential youthfulness." It is "nourished by the absolute." Thus born of the spirit, it has but to be true to itself—to its desire "to elevate mankind, to teach it to think, to set it free," to be able at long last "to laugh at the boastful pretensions of the fascist dictatorships."